

Conducting a family strengths assessment using the AFS nursing assessment guide.

By Mr Lindsay Smith

Some general comments on the AFS nursing assessment

The Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment (AFS nursing assessment) that I constructed is designed to provide nurses with a range of questions across the eight qualities of Australian family strengths (Smith 2008). These eight qualities of family strengths were identified by Australians as being important to them. In developing the assessment questions under each quality for the AFS nursing assessment guide the language that Australians used to describe their family and how they interact together has been faithfully used. The AFS nursing assessment can help you encourage conversations with a family across the eight qualities of family strengths. This I hope will be a generic strength of the tool. However as the local health professional living and working in the community, you know how best to talk with your fellow locals and any adaptation of the questions to suit local need can be easily carried out.

The AFS nursing assessment is not designed as a diagnostic tool that can classify or rank families according to their level of functioning. You can not generate any type of score that is meaningful. Even with a family that does not relate to any of the qualities of family strengths in the guide, they can not be 'labelled' as having no strengths. Rather, only that the strengths included in the AFS are not the ones that they currently include in their everyday activities. You may need to explore other strengths that the family value. From conversations with families you can begin to walk closer with the family in their effort to promote optimal developmental health and wellbeing for each other.

Since publishing the AFS nursing assessment in 2008, I have received feedback from various community nurses who have used this in their practice. I am in the process of evaluating this feedback and will hopefully publish the results in 2010. Here are some comments received from Registered Nurses in Australia about the AFS nursing assessment guide and its clinical use:

'Using the AFS nursing assessment guide was refreshing, it was nice to look at the positives in a person or family as opposed to the negative attributes. Nurses using this tool can identify strengths and then feedback to the family members, allowing families to develop goals and strengths to solve problems. Listening to families helped to build trust with them, improving our relationship in which the family felt they could share their feelings. This is a great step forward in client-nurse relationships as we are better able to include their strengths in our care plans.'

'The tool has enabled this family to have a better perception of the nurse engagement in the care of Mrs C. Ultimately this resulted in better acceptance of the nurses role, more prompt acceptance of advice in the care and a better involvement by some family members. Some family members mentioned how using the AFS nursing assessment guide has effectively helped them in realising how strong their family was

and that together they will be able to manage even a challenging and distressing situation as their mother's illness.'

'I found using this tool with the family very easy, they felt comfortable answering the questions, I think they actually enjoyed discussing their strengths.'

'The reality of community health nursing is that community nurses in our area are only moderately involved in the care of traditional families but more involved in the care of disadvantaged single people or elderly couples living in social isolation and with socio-economic issues. In these cases the concept of family is a fluid one and their support networks are often informal services (neighbours, members of the local church or friends) rather than family. Nonetheless the tool can help to identify strengths even in these contexts and maybe particularly focus on availability and utilisation of community assets as a way to promote family strengths. Despite these limitations the AFS nursing assessment can be useful in helping to identify inner strengths and in helping people to understand that often they are more resilient and have more strengths than they think they have.'

'The tool provides easy questions that allow a continuous and interesting flow of conversation leading to a clear understanding of how strengths can be built.'

'The time consuming aspect of using this guide is far outweighed by its benefits in terms of family and community development.'

'I found this assessment child friendly and easy to use with any member of the family.'

Some advice on conducting a family strengths assessment using the AFS nursing assessment guide

Here is a suggested approach to using the AFS nursing assessment. You may adapt this to suit your needs and the family's capacity.

Invite all the family to participate in this activity and work out when it would suit everyone for you to visit them. Let them decide who is in their family and who should be there. Don't be worried if other people are included rather ask how everyone fits together (both the genogram and the ecomap are good for this). Be careful however that some members of the family don't feel excluded especially children and teenagers. This is an 'all in' activity! It may be necessary to just meet with those family members who are readily available however let them know that you are willing to work around their schedule. Let the family decide who, when and where within professional parameters that maintain safety.

Initially identify for the family that you would like to have a conversation with them about how they relate to each other and that you want to learn what is important to them. You may like to mention that the focus of your discussion is on family strengths and if necessary you will redirect the conversations towards strengths. (There is an important place for deficit assessments however this is not what the focus is for this activity).

Commence the conversation by asking the first or a relevant question in one of the eight qualities of Australian family strengths. Try to identify a quality that you have noticed particular strength being displayed and make a statement reflecting what you see happening. For example if the family members are enjoying spending time together, perhaps the father and siblings are playing together whilst things are getting organised, say “I am really enjoying seeing how easy it is for you to play together and ask “How often would you play together as a family?” Ask participants if they believe that this is a quality that the family has then place an ‘S’ (for strength) beside the question if they agree or ‘G’ (for growth) beside the question if this is an area where they want to grow further. From their answers encourage further conversation such as what game is a family favourite? (If it is a board game, despite the temptation to get it out and have a game, please finish the assessment first).

Where a family identifies that a question or quality is not relevant to them, just note ‘not applicable’. There is no need to explore further at this stage. You may consider exploring other strength areas further as you walk beside the family at a later date.

From the AFS nursing assessment guide you can build a picture for both yourself and the family of the strengths they embrace and the qualities that they want to further adopt or grow. Depending on your relationship and scope of nursing practice with the family the insights that you gain about the family strengths can be incorporated into your nursing care. Subsequently you can incorporate their strengths into your nursing care or you can discuss strategies to grow in different areas. Perhaps family communication was identified as an area for growth. The community health service may use this finding to identify a local need and offer a family communication workshop in the near future.

The first and perhaps most important outcome from the AFS nursing assessment guide is the strengthening of the nurse-family relationship and the development of trust that is based on shared understanding and respect. Nursing is seen to value what is most important to the family over other priorities.

I hope that these few comments are helpful in conducting a family strengths assessment. Please contact me to discuss how to conduct a family assessment or any aspects of the AFS nursing assessment. I would also value any feedback on the use and or application of this tool.

Regards

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Reference:

Smith, LM (2008) Family assessment and the Australian Family Strengths Nursing Assessment Guide. In: *Child, Youth and Family Health: Strengthening Communities*. Elsevier, Australia, pp. 11-18. ISBN 978 0 72953 799 5